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Statism and individualism

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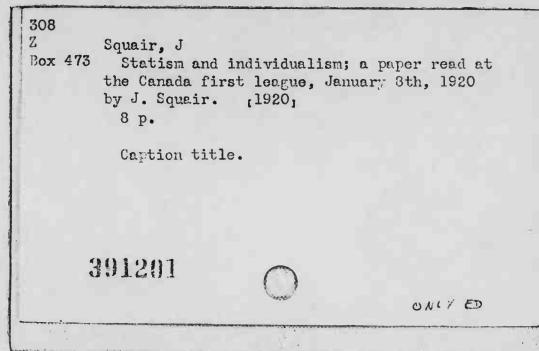
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# STATISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

A Paper Read at the CANADA FIRST LEAGUE, January 8th, 1920.

By J. SQUET

IN 1896 it was my fortune to address the Fifteen Club, which was in a sense the predecessor of the Canada First League, on certain aspects of the question of the influence of constitutional forms upon national development. On that occasion I began my remarks with the quotation of a somewhat famous passage from the Diderot of John Morley in which that eminent man says that: "The economic conditions of a country, and the administration of its laws, are far more vitally related to its well-being than the form of its government." I then went on to say that great upheavals and consequent changes of government, such, for instance, as the French Revolution, had often not produced the results expected of them and attributed to them. I quoted from great economic authorities, like the Vicomte d'Avenel, to show that working men's wages, for instance, had for centuries in France remained substantially at the same level of purchasing power, and I showed with only too great ease that taxation and the public debt had, under the Republic, been enormously increased. It was easy to show that waste in administration, due to favoritism and other forms of political corruption, had not diminished since the days of the Ancien Régime. If I were discussing the same question to-day, I could also say with great relevancy that ancient diplomacy was not more secret, arbitrary and elusive than that of modern times.

Finally, I thought I saw in the fact—patent to all—that greater public discontent prevailed in 1896 than in 1789, a strong proof of the view that a Republic was not more satisfactory than a Monarchy. And discussing the question to-day one might say that all the changes in constitutions, codes, enactments and regulations had not prevented the nations from indulging in a huge and senseless war which has cost millions of lives and has nearly, if not quite, bankrupted the world.

Human government has indeed but little to its credit to-day, any more than it had in 1896. But in spite of that fact it is quite wonderful how the greater part of the world persists in respecting its elected deliberative bodies. No matter how inefficient, corrupt and vulgar parliaments and cabinets become, no matter how many improvident enterprises are engaged in, we still render them honor and obedience. But it may not be so always. Society does seem at times to be on the brink of an abyss, into which it may thrust its time-honored governmental forms. It would not be surprising if the party of anarchy were much stronger than it really is. If men in high position do not act wisely and with decorum, there may be upheavals of a serious kind, which will work out disastrous results.

But in spite of this fact the number of those who seem to realize what a broken reed government is, must be small, for the great mass of expressed opinion is in favor of increasing its power and importance, and it is interesting to discuss why this is so. If we analyze society a little from this

standpoint we discover certain groupings—some respectable, some less so—which help us to understand the foundations on which respect for governments is based.

There still remain a large remnant who take seriously the command, "Fear God. Honor the King."

The traditional feeling that government is essentially wise and benevolent persists in many minds.

There still are many who consider the marking of a ballot as one of the highest functions of citizenship.

Government decrees, Orders-in-Council, Acts of Parliament are still regarded by many as sacred tables handed down from Sinai for the good of men.

Then there is the fanatic, stirred by the honest detestation of some evil or perchance by the suggestions of ignorant prejudice or of a diseased imagination, who demands of government the inclusion of all forms of sin, and sometimes even of innocent indulgence, in the Criminal Code.

There is, too, the promoter with soaring imagination and a fine disregard of trifling considerations like those involved in the multiplication of state, who stampedes government into enterprises for the good of the people which often end in disaster. And governments are all too ready to assume new and heavy responsibilities. It is in the nature of things that they should take themselves seriously, that they should pose as Saviours of men.

But such reflections must not carry us too far. Modern men must realize that although government has been often disappointing, it is necessary. The harm is done when it constitutes too great an encroachment on the activities of individual men. The temptation to encroach on the individual is very strong and full of danger to mankind as a whole. Whatever tends to weaken personal initiative cuts at the root of the productive progressiveness of the race. An excessively paternal form of government tends to smother ambitious effort. If all our actions were controlled by a central authority there is little doubt that what we call improvement would be greatly diminished—would perhaps disappear altogether. It is significant that many Socialists now express the belief that the extension of State control to industry would greatly diminish the output. But they console themselves with the idea that the diminution of the output would be a great blessing for the world.

Such might indeed be the case. But there is also the danger that the decrease of production might be great enough to involve the destruction of civilization itself. For obviously the margin is not very wide. The economic situation of the world after four years of war has surely made it plain to all who are willing to see that even after a long period of material prosperity, such as the world had between, say, 1870 and 1914, the savings of humanity are at any period speedily exhaustible. Men live practically even in time of peace from hand to mouth, and civilization is made possible because of the margin, narrow withal, which lies between production and consumption. There is no large fund of savings to draw upon, and that little is all that lies between us and want, which, if sufficiently prolonged, would lead us to barbarism. Many have been living in a fairy land of economic illusion. And that is not surprising, for the opening up of new regions and the application of mechanical devices to production and transportation had so increased the world's output that men had acquired exaggerated ideas as to the productive capacities of the race. Some seem to have thought that the days of hard work and prudence were past. Optimistic eyes peering into the future saw a worker's day of two or three hours as sufficient for the material needs of the race.

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But that day has not come yet. The amount of strenuous effort still demanded of the workers is great and will long remain one of the most important factors in the economy of human things.

The basis of all sound thinking in economics is the realization of the truth that the good things of life—the bread, clothing, fuel and shelter, which we all need—are all hard to get and hard to preserve; men and women must be astir to have them, and it is not likely that ever mere wheels, cogs and belts can become so efficient that human brains and hands can be relieved of stress in their acquisition. Beware of him who tells you the human race may have them for the mere picking up. Such a one is a dangerous person, who either is blind to facts or who is trying to mislead.

And yet this fancy is accepted by many minds, and becomes the root of other fancies, such, for instance, as the notion that commodities are always too dear and that the excessive price is due to producers and middlemen who are able in some mysterious way to acquire their wares too cheap and sell them too dear whilst they suck the heart's blood of all those whom they notions. These are the minds who will not accept such self-evident notions, as, for instance, the validity of the law of supply and demand, and who believe that villainous cornering of markets is one of the commonest amusements of the business man. These are they who appeal to government to protect the innocent lambs who get closely shorn when attempting to shear others. They are the ones who clamor for commissions to investigate why other commissions previously appointed by the same government have not put a stop to the abominable practices of profiteering.

Some of these have even come to the conclusion that buying and selling for profit are sinful and must be suppressed by the State. Business seems to be for them a complex of diabolical practices, the natural occupation of thieves and swindlers. One may well ask himself why such views are held. Business practices may not be all they should be, still that part of humanity engaged in business will compare favorably with the politicians, the clergy or the educators. The successful business man must at least play the game, and there is usually in that fact a stronger guarantee for uprightness and serviceability than is to be found in the eloquence of what might be called the talking professions.

The idea that the desire of gain is a wicked thing is false and foolish. It is just as legitimate to wish for profit when honest effort is expended as it is to wish for a good dinner after a good day's work. It is true that high-minded men curb these desires, knowing that all human qualities need to be moderated, but no wise person who understands what men are would think of eliminating such a deep-seated and widespread affection of the human mind. It is impossible to do, but even if it were possible it would be highly injurious to the race to remove such a powerful impetus to action.

We are told that we should put the desire to do social service in the place of the desire for profit. But there is no incompatibility between the two. The person who is making honest effort for the love of profit in legitimate enterprise is quite as likely to be performing social service as the one who spends his life in what is called "uplift" of the race. It is impossible to be making, transporting and selling useful things to our fellows without doing them good. The man who raises a bushel of wheat or makes a pair of shoes for profit is a benefactor to the race; oftentimes a much surer benefactor than he who preaches a sermon or writes a book for the purposes of edification.

It is important that we should be clear in our thinking in regard to

this point. Many a silly attempt to be useful to society would be avoided if people were only more sure that an honest occupation for profit is just as high and noble as any other form of human effort and less likely to become wasteful and fantastic. Let men stick close to profitable employment and be assured that in so doing they are performing good service to themselves and to others. The State which should attempt to prevent such action by the individual members of itself would soon find itself reduced to starvation and barbarism.

The settlement, however, of the dividing line between individual action and collective action has always been a difficult thing, and is likely to continue so. What are the things which the State can best do, and what the individual? Let us look a little into details.

Certain national functions are inevitable and no argument regarding them is necessary. If there is to be a State at all, peace must be kept internally and defence against exterior enemies must be maintained, and some internal and external means of communication must exist. That is, there must be soldiers, policemen, judges and roadmakers. These are all of very ancient origin, and there would be little dispute amongst men regarding them. But when we pass beyond these primary elements of the State there is much room for difference of opinion.

For instance, should religion be a State or a private affair? In the past it has been very commonly considered as one of the most important functions of the State (and is so still in many countries). To-day it tends to become a private matter. In many countries, as in Canada, it has become, at least in theory, wholly an affair of the individual conscience. Nevertheless religious and quasi-religious subjects do invade the field of public activity. Religious prejudice not infrequently guides the hand that marks the ballot and the tongue which frames policies. And it is curious to note that as the fervor of orthodoxy dies down it is sometimes replaced by the fervor of fussiness, to such an extent that the emphasis of piety is shifted from points like the Trinity or the Atonement to those of Lord's Day Observance and Teetotalism. Many good people have substituted for zeal in soul-saving a strong desire to make addenda to the Decalogue and to give greater amplitude to the Criminal Code. In this, doubtless, there lies great danger both to individual liberty and to national peace and prosperity. Resistance to it will soon be recognized by many as a civic duty.

In a somewhat closely related department, viz., that of education, the tendency in most countries is towards a more complete assumption by the State of the work of educating the young. And yet it is growing clear to some that the State is performing this function rather poorly; the feeling prevails in some quarters that there are inherent weaknesses in State schools which probably can never be cured, the chief of which consist in the fact that schools are usually regarded as unreal things by those who have most to do with them, i.e., by pupils and teachers.

It has also been remarked that there is some resemblance between the steam engine and the State-controlled educational system. In both there is an enormous waste of energy. The uniformity, which seems inevitable, in the preparation of teachers, in the making of school manuals, in the arrangement of schemes of study, and so on, tends to stifle enthusiasm in both teachers and pupils. Interest in a subject is crushed by the weight of regulations, prohibitions and admonitions issued by paternalistic Departments. And worst of all, student and teacher tend to regard the regularly measured snippets of truth contained in a school-book as all that there is to be learned about the vast mountains of human knowledge. Self-satisfied priggishness usurps the place of the desire to know.

And at the same time there are strong forces at work to widen very greatly the scope of the State-governed school. Many things which were once left to the care of the home, the farm and the shop are now being handed over to the school, partly, we are told, for the purpose of making the school more real. One should not be charged with being a pessimist if he has fears that the school may not be able to bear the new burdens which so-called progressive educationists desire to place on its shoulders. The day may come when true progress in education will be considered the synonym of simplification and not of complication, as is the case now.

The idea that the school is a microcosm in which all the activities of the great macrocosm outside shall be mimicked, may, if persisted in by enthusiasts, involve the destruction of all useful education. If every child at the age of entering school shall have to declare what profession he intends to pursue so that he may receive his proper vocational training, then will the system break down under the weight of inherent folly. But the good sense of plain people will perhaps intervene to prevent such exaggeration of madness, if in no other way than by the stoppage of supplies. State schools seem to be necessary, but they should be kept simple.

If we pass over some important services, more or less well done by municipalities and the nation, such as sanitation, supply of water, etc., we come to the one branch of national administration in modern times which may be considered as reasonably successful, i.e., the Post-Office. And it is worth while to reflect on the success of this department, for therein we may catch a clue to guide us in the labyrinth of discussion in which we are engaged. The postal service is in its essentials a fairly simple one. It demands in officials no very great technical skill. It asks for orderliness, promptness and honesty, which fortunately are qualities which one may regard as possible to secure.

And it is dangerous to argue, as is sometimes done, that because the transportation of letters is well managed by the State, the carriage of freight in packages of all sizes plus the conveyance of living creatures through all kinds of distances may be equally well managed by a government office. It is true that such things are in many countries under State control, but usually there is much less unanimity of opinion as to the success of government management in their case than in the case of the Post-Office. In Canada our State management of railroads has not been a brilliant achievement, and yet we are on the point of adding an enormous mileage to our national railway system. It would not be a surprising thing if in no remote future we should have cause for profound regret that our Government ever became so deeply involved in such enterprises.

For it is observed that the functions of railways have been very much extended. They now comprise not only the transportation of passengers and freight comparatively short distances by land, but for long distances in alien countries, and by sea as well as land, including entertainment in vast hotels. The Minister of Railways will have charge of a large army of engineers, conductors, stevedores, waiters, cooks, stewards, sailors and so on, often perhaps alien, or if not such, all (male and female) having votes well organized to determine who the Minister himself is to be. The man who believes that this office will be successfully filled has more than a proper share of optimism in his constitution.

Some twenty years ago a wave of strong feeling passed over this continent, which found expression in a striking phrase, "The Public Ownership of Public Utilities." It became fashionable to say harsh things of the Boards of Directors and Managers of gas companies, street railways and the like. Prospective mayors and aldermen found it hard to be elected

unless they subscribed to the doctrine of P. O. of P. U. They had to make it clear that they were on the People's side, that they were opposed to robbery by the bandits of the private ownership of public utilities. And accordingly if in a town there were privately owned gas or tram companies it became necessary for the Town Council to quarrel as often as possible with these companies in order to give a reputation for public zeal to the Mayor and Aldermen and help to keep them in office in subsequent years. The accompanying lawsuits were costly for the public treasury, and in addition the misunderstandings engendered lowered the quality of the service rendered the municipality. But these were trifles. The great thing was that high principles were inculcated and defended. If you make progress in regard to ideals you must expect to pay for it. The newspapers, with great unanimity, placed themselves on the side of Public Ownership. If perchance here and there old-fashioned papers expressed their doubts regarding the wisdom of the wholesale adoption of the new policy it was not uncommon to insinuate, or charge openly, that such journals were subsidized by the capitalists. That a free, unbiased, uncorrupted mind could be in favor of private ownership was for the average newspaper unthinkable.

In this Province the most considerable outcome of this movement was what we know as the Hydro-Electric System, which is usually regarded with great favor by the people. Rarely does one hear any criticism of it. And yet it is surely obvious that, with inefficient management, it may become a serious source of loss to the Province. Indeed it is showing signs at present calculated to disturb our peace of mind. That the management of the system should have chosen the present time as a suitable one for plunging into vast, unknown expenditures betokens a lack of prudence which is not reassuring. The easy wave of the hand with which the noble Knight, who guides the affair, signed the agreement with the threatening strikers last spring, by which, with one stroke of the pen, seven million dollars per annum were added to the expenses, is highly significant. Such a crisis and such a solution may soon arise again. The public dollar is a very nimble one and rolls smoothly from the State Treasury into the wide pockets of contractors and placemen.

But although we should insist upon securing to the individual the largest amount of liberty, it is not meant that the individual has no obligation to serve the State. Quite the contrary. He is under the deepest obligation to serve others, and the reason for giving him the fullest liberty is that, under freedom he can render the best service to the whole body of the people. Enforced public virtue, enforced generosity, are mere contradictions in terms. It is only when a man who is free to be ungenerous, chooses to be generous, that he is really so. No one can be forced to be good.

One of the special temptations of lawmakers is to make too many laws, and particularly under democratic forms of government. Legislatures in permanent session, as is often the case in this age, are exceedingly dangerous institutions. If they could be closed during seventy-five per cent. of the time they are now open the health of the states they serve would be much improved. The wise man in fair health does not call the doctor too often. He trusts somewhat to nature and to Providence. Too much prohibitive legislation is bad; it tends to make hypocrites; too much legislation of a kindly, helpful sort, tends to make not only hypocrites but also spineless weaklings. Restrictive legislation should be confined to those who would do injustice to others. Promotive legislation should not be a source of privilege to a few, and of burden-bearing to the many. The attempt should be to deal out even-handed justice to all, to protect the

diligent man in the prosecution of honest business, to punish him who would molest others. A sharp distinction should be drawn in law between sin and crime. The man who brawls in the streets in a drunken condition deserves to be punished; he is a danger and a nuisance. But it does not follow that it is good policy for the State to forbid even the moderate use in private of comparatively harmless beverages. By so doing the State may bring itself and its laws into contempt, and breed a race of anarchists. In justice it must be said that the Province of Ontario runs this risk at this juncture.

A high form of State would be one in which a good proportion of the people would be anxious to perform public service and where the Government would be willing to confine itself to guidance rather than to compulsion, whether restrictive or promotive. The trouble with the people usually is that they are selfish and indifferent and very often ignorant. And since, unfortunately, election methods are, and have always been, defective, the Governments that get into power are unable to give wise guidance. The result is that public action is usually clumsy, corrupt, costly and ineffective. The only cure is the increase of those who are willing to give service outside of government control. In the past too much stress has been laid on discussions regarding the forms of government. Should we cut ourselves loose from England? Should we join the United States? Should we be a republic or a monarchy? and so on, and so on.

These questions have some importance, but they probably have less than the question of, say, our future fuel. Questions regarding heat and cold, drought and rainfall, sand, clay or rock, etc., make enormous differences sometimes—make all the difference there is between Europeans, Esquimaux and Negroes. Our future civilization may be determined more by what we can grow than by the form of government we may chance to have, now or twenty years hence.

One may ask what kinds of service may be rendered the State outside of government control. One way presents itself in connection with the cultivation of our land. A good deal is being done by government agencies, such as the Guelph College, but a great deal still remains. There is room for the spending of many millions in the endowment of experimental stations up and down the Province in order to discover what reforesting, orchard planting, cereal raising, etc., we could most profitably practice. The people of Ontario do not yet adequately know what their soil and climate can do. But private action might bring better results here than public. May there be more men like Rittenhouse of Vineland!

I have already spoken of our fuel problem. We have no coal, and what shall we do in the future? How shall we warm ourselves in our long, cold winters? The price of Pennsylvania coal is already almost prohibitive. We may perhaps in the future heat ourselves by using atomic energy, but meantime we must use simpler means. We ought perhaps to be producing wood on our bare blow-sand spots which will not grow cereals. Some of us have planted a little—enough to show what might be done. Then there is the question of petroleum. The world's stores of this precious substance are not inexhaustible. What is to take its place? Perhaps we might make alcohol from cheap farm products like potatoes, inferior fruits, etc. Another point is the many streams flowing into our lakes. They once furnished motive power for saw-mills, grist-mills, tanneries, etc. Is it possible to utilize them now for the production of electricity? We should be investigating, and any man who has money might help. There are also many problems connected with our fish, farm animals, leather-making, weaving, wood-working, minerals, building

stone, etc., etc., regarding many of which there is great ignorance.

On the artistic side, too, much needs to be done. Some Ontario men have made fortunes out of paper and have donated fine gifts to hospitals, etc. But no one, so far as my knowledge goes, has ever devoted himself to the improvement of book-making—a thing in which we are very far behind.

Nor should we overlook the need of decorating the walls of our public buildings. How many square yards, nay, acres of bare walls, are there in Toronto and other towns of Ontario awaiting suitable decoration by our painters? Here there is room for unlimited devotion to the public interest.

Our learning, too, needs encouragement. Prizes, scholarships and professorships are needed in all parts, in schools and colleges, in all kinds of subjects. It is cheering to know that something is being done here by private enterprise. We have the Edward Blake and the Carter Scholarships. Mr. George B. Nicholson of Algoma is reported recently (Dec. 19) as giving a scholarship to Chapleau Continuation School. And there are a good many more, such as the Eaton Endowments, although much still remains to be done.

Witty remarks are sometimes made regarding the multitude of secret societies which flourish amongst Anglo-Saxons in North America and the trivial or sometimes corrupt things they do. And lodge influence is often evil and regrettable. Yet all these things have a useful side. They help to stimulate a public action which is practically independent of government control. How much better to have them with all their pettiness than to have an excess of censors and repressive regulation of meetings such as prevail in many countries. But these societies should be doing more for the public good. They should spend less on fine regalia and stupid processions and lend more encouragement to public sanitation, to the relief of orphans, to education and to moral effort. They do some of these now, but they might do much more.

But now I must close. I hope I may encourage some to look deeper than the study of constitutional questions, however interesting, into the things which really determine what constitutions are, and how they are to function; into the things upon which civilization itself is founded. The relations existing between race, climatic conditions, geographical phenomena, food in its abundance or scarcity, national constitutions, municipal institutions, public or private morality, etc., etc., are very complex and difficult of elucidation, and to change a constitution may produce a much smaller result than to change an article of food or of drink.

My advice would be to worry less about political changes, to strive harder to raise intelligence and make conscience keener, convinced that if the individual rises the State will rise also, slowly perhaps, but much more surely than by the application of any amount of political engineering, flag-waving and vapid talk about the glories of civilization.

Above all let us try to prevent governments from interfering in private affairs. We have been taught that an Englishman's house is his castle. Let us try to render more solid this good old tradition and all that is akin to it. Let us not forget that all that is good in humanity must rest on a basis of self-reliance, which grandmotherly oversight tends to weaken and destroy. Free men in the exercise of liberty will sometimes do despicable wrong, but even so, there is less danger here than in the creation and development of a breed of sneaking, hypocritical creatures whose masked faces and poisoned daggers may meet us at every turn of the road in the future, if we are not careful to produce true independence of character.

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